



(U) InSIDer's View of History: Onboard Air Force Two Bound for Moscow

FROM: Bob Blackwell

Assistant Deputy Director for Analysis and Production (S2)

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(U//FOUO) Sometimes an unforeseen event happens that sets a person up for future success. Such an incident happened to me fairly early in my career. The year was 1982, and the long-time leader of the Soviet Union, Leonid Brezhnev, had just died. At the time I was the chief of the Domestic Politics Division in the CIA's Office of Soviet Analysis, so suddenly my area of expertise was the hottest topic.

(U//FOUO) President Reagan asked his Vice President, George H.W. Bush, to represent the U.S. at Brezhnev's funeral. V.P. Bush was traveling in Africa at the time, so plans were quickly made to fly him to the Frankfurt Rhein-Main Airport in Germany, and from there proceed to Moscow. Meanwhile, Bob Gates, the CIA's Deputy Director of Intelligence, wanted to provide the V.P. with a highly classified intelligence report about the new Soviet leader, Yuri Andropov. I was tapped to deliver the document to V.P. Bush and answer any questions that he might have.

(C) A CIA courier and I hurried off to Frankfurt with the document in hand. We stored the paper overnight at a secure facility in the area and waited for the V.P.'s arrival the following day. On my own initiative, I decided that I wanted to be on that plane to Moscow. I took a few pieces of clothing from my suitcase and stashed them in my briefcase on the outside chance that I would be allowed to make the trip. Sure enough, my offer to accompany the V.P.'s group to Moscow was accepted, and my briefcase and I were on our way.

(U//FOUO) When I joined the CIA, I never imagined that some day I'd be flying to Moscow on Air Force Two, briefing the Vice President. But this is exactly what happened. I briefed Mr. Bush on the contents of the report and we spent most of the remainder of the flight discussing Soviet affairs. It was a non-stop session, and he asked many questions. By the way, Mr. Bush was a very easy person to talk to; he was serious, but he had a good sense of humor and a down-to-earth manner.

(C) When we arrived in Moscow, I had to find somewhere to put the classified report. Although the main U.S. Embassy facilities were closed, I managed to secure the document at the "commo" room (24-hr communications facility). I happened to run into an acquaintance at the Embassy, and he found a place for me to stay. (I had been in Moscow twice before, in 1976 and 1981, so I knew some of the people there.)

(U//FOUO) The next day, we watched the funeral on television from the Embassy. I provided a running commentary for the State Department folks who had been in Africa and explained who was who, since the Soviet Union was not their area of expertise. During



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this time I got to know several people who went on to become ambassadors later in their careers -- establishing contacts like this can pay dividends for years to come. The next day, we flew back to Washington.

(U//FOUO) Naturally, when I got back to work at the CIA, many people wanted me to brief them about what happened. As I was talking to DDI Gates, I learned that the Chief of Station (COS) in Moscow was quote "livid" that I had arrived unexpectedly in Moscow, and had asked what "idiot" let me go. In response, Gates told the COS, "I am that idiot!" I don't think we heard any further complaints from the COS on the subject.

(U//FOUO) This experience opened up all kinds of doors for me. Since I was a known quantity, I was asked to go to Moscow in 1984 and 1985 for the funerals of Andropov and Chernenko. (There was a lot of turnover there until the relatively young Gorbachev took over.) I was asked to brief Mr. Bush on three other occasions, at both the Vice President's official residence at the Naval Observatory and at Camp David after he had been elected President. At Camp David, the President had all of his senior advisors in attendance, including Condoleezza Rice, and I was part of a 4-person CIA group briefing him on Soviet affairs in preparation for his summit with Gorbachev in Malta.

(U//FOUO) It goes without saying that to be successful in your career, you must know your business. But some luck certainly doesn't hurt! There were others who could have briefed the Vice President on Soviet affairs, but I was in the right place at the right time. I suppose the moral of the story is that when you have an opportunity, you have to seize it... and then you just hope it all works out ok.

(U//FOUO) *Note from SIGINT Communications: There is a photo on Mr. Blackwell's wall taken during V.P. Bush's flight to Moscow on Air Force Two in 1982. The Vice President wrote on the picture, "They die, we fly," which became an insider's joke on later trips Mr. Blackwell made with the Vice President for funereal visits to the Soviet Union.*

(U//FOUO) See other editions of *InSIDer's View of History* :

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